

Bartram, B. (2020) Exploring International and Comparative Education, in C.A. Simon & S. Ward (2020) *A Student's Guide to Education Studies*, London: Routledge, pp. 87-97.

Introduction

This chapter offers an introduction to an area of educational studies often described as international and comparative education. This field of study rests on a long tradition, and the chapter begins by sketching its early origins and examining the ways the discipline has evolved. It moves on to a discussion of its various aims and purposes, and considers the reasons why educational comparisons have become of growing global interest. Finally, the chapter looks at a number of important considerations that sometimes call into question the validity of educational comparisons and what they are claimed to show.

What is international and comparative education?

Students of education employ a range of lenses through which to view and understand what education is, means and how it operates. Concepts and analytical tools are often employed from the disciplines of sociology, psychology, history or political science in an attempt to explain educational processes, trends and developments. In a sense, international and comparative education is just an additional lens that can be adopted to sharpen our insights into the nature of schools and schooling. However, given its ability to add contours and textures to the educational landscapes under investigation by bringing together theoretical perspectives in contrasting contexts, international and comparative education is an important field of enquiry in its own right.

Its origins are often linked to a number of Nineteenth Century figures such as the Frenchman Victor Cousin, the German Friedrich Thiersch, Mathew Arnold in England and Horace Mann in the USA. These educationists have been described as being “motivated by a desire to gain useful lessons from abroad” (Noah and Eckstein, 1969:15), a motivation which led them to being among the first to produce studies

examining and comparing aspects of education in other countries. Many of their reports were influential in the authors' home countries – Mathew Arnold (1822-1888), for example, a renowned educational inspector in his day, paid numerous visits to schools across Continental Europe as part of a fact-finding mission for the Newcastle Commission (1861) and the Taunton Commission (1868), whose findings had a particular steer on elementary and secondary school reforms in England. Such early political interest in overseas education systems has continued and indeed expanded ever since, with growing numbers of academics, universities and international organisations around the world promoting the development of the discipline.

As a result of this growth, international and comparative education is now a wide-ranging, multidisciplinary field, accommodating many different areas of interest and types of investigation. Trying to categorise the range of studies that fall under this broad umbrella term is not an easy task, though many scholars offer us their views. Alexander (2014) provides a useful categorisation of different types of study within the field. Under type one, he refers to the growing number of large-scale surveys and studies that have come to characterise much of the work done in the field. Examples include many of the projects carried out by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys. Burghes (2018) offers an interesting discussion and analysis of such studies in Bartram (2018).

With regard to the second type of studies, Alexander (2014) refers to reports which often draw on data derived from the kinds of enquiries mentioned above under type one, but use the data collected as a basis for advocating particular policies and approaches that are regarded as central elements in whatever the data are claimed to show – usually high levels of student performance in particular subjects. This kind of policy advocacy is often regarded with a degree of scepticism by educationists, though politicians frequently exercise less caution (as discussed below). Reasons for widespread educational scepticism are again discussed in the Burghes and Field chapters in Bartram (2018), but in essence relate to the ways in which some of these reports claim a causative connection between educational practices and outcomes – often, the success of particular policies relies on complex amalgams of social and

cultural factors alongside educational approaches that cannot always be easily transferred and replicated. Phillips and Ochs (2004) offer an interesting analysis of the processes of policy borrowing, and the merits and demerits of the research approaches made use of.

The third and final type of studies described by Alexander (2014) concerns the very broad array of academic articles published around the world based on an almost endless number of educational themes, from the organisation and development of school curricula, to contrasting approaches to adult/vocational education, funding and management mechanisms, and myriad aspects of teaching, learning and assessment at different system levels. My own work is a good illustration of this third type, and reflects an equally broad-ranging set of topics, from the construction of learner attitudes to Modern Foreign Language Learning in England and Holland, to the factors that motivate students to enrol at university in Germany and Portugal (Bartram, 2012 and 2016).

Activity

In groups, select 2 education systems and use the following as an analytical framework for comparing. Eurydice has an excellent database of all European education systems – go to <http://www.eurdice.org> and click on the Eurybase link.

- social and political contexts
- underlying educational ideologies
- broad goals
- overall system structure
- curriculum content
- teaching and learning principles
- main assessment approaches
- current educational developments

The aims of international and comparative education

There are a number of purposes behind educational comparison, and once again, many scholars have set about the task of defining explicitly the nature of these purposes. One rationale, as Phillips describes it, is that ‘comparing is a fundamental part of the thought processes which enable us to make sense of the world’ (1999:15). Alexander (1999:27) has argued that ‘comparison is actually essential to educational progress...education by its nature requires hard choices of both a technical and moral kind. To make such choices requires an awareness of options and alternatives, together with the capacity to judge what is most fitting.’ These ideas reflect two elements that are fundamental to the discipline – the ideas of extending educational understanding and making improvements. The interest in educational improvement has grown significantly over the past thirty years or so, though a concern simply to develop our understanding and knowledge through comparison was arguably the key motive for much of the discipline’s history. Lauwerys and Tayar (1973: xii) highlight this central aim:

Comparative education is not, in essence, normative: it does not prescribe rules for the good conduct of schools and teaching. It does not aim at laying down what should be done. It does not offer views as to what education ought to be like. It attempts only to understand what is being done and why.

Marshall (2014) provides a useful synopsis of additional reasons for educational comparison:

- to learn about our own education system and that of others;
- to enhance our knowledge of education in general;
- to improve educational institutions; their content, processes and methods;
- to understand the relationship between education and society;
- to promote international understanding;
- to find possible solutions to educational issues.

Understanding the ways in which the nature of different societies affects education systems is an ongoing interest for comparativists, though the challenge it presents is

not a simple one. Cowen (2005:179) nicely articulates the complexities involved in this task:

How do societies relate to (that is, affect, shape, influence, frame, penetrate or determine) educational systems and their components, such as teacher education provision, types of schools, administrative structures, universities, examination systems and so on? The problem is a tricky one because clearly, history, economics, social stratification patterns, politics and religious belief systems are all potentially forces that define the 'nature' of societies, and in ways that are not crystal clear, extend into the institutional patterns of educational systems...and curriculum practices.

For many years, the notion of educational ideologies has been helpful to comparativists. Though the idea of ideology may have fallen out of favour in some quarters in more recent times as a result of competing post-modern perspectives, they offer us a set of analytical tools for trying to account for the ways in which society influences education. Based on the idea that a particular society may be based on a broadly shared set of beliefs and values (i.e. an ideology) we can then look to see how such values have infused and informed educational developments in that country. Since ancient Greek times, scholars have sought to investigate these ideological linkages. More recently, though still some fifty years ago, Brubacher (1966) outlined the influence of twelve different educational ideologies (from sophism to pragmatism), while Holmes and McLean (1989) refer to a more restricted set of ideologies in order to explore how predominant beliefs in certain parts of the world have influenced educational developments. They compare the over-arching ideologies of essentialism, encyclopaedism and pragmatism. Essentialism is described as a non-utilitarian, elitist view of education which sees clear divisions and levels of status between vocational and academic education – and indeed, who these should be geared towards. They link this way of thinking to the classical humanist ideology and discuss the notions of morality, specialisation and individuality which they argue to have been key influences on education in England.

This is contrasted with encyclopaedism, an ideology regarded as especially influential in many Continental European countries. Holmes and McLean argue that this

ideology is ‘based on the premise that the content of education should include all human knowledge’ (1989:11), and that this view gained strong traction in post-revolutionary France, where the principles of rationality, universality and utility that are fundamental to the encyclopaedic perspective were adopted because of democratic desires to equalise society.

Pragmatism, a different ideology altogether, is attributed to the American educationalist Dewey. They authors describe a more naturalistic vision of education that focuses strongly on the needs of the learner, social development and the relationship between the individual and society. The distinction between education and training that is so marked within the essentialist perspective above is viewed as an artificial and potentially damaging division from this ideological standpoint.

Activity

Search the internet for information on classical humanism, encyclopaedism and pragmatism/naturalism. Birgit Pepin’s article *Curriculum, cultural traditions and pedagogy* is a useful starting point, and is available at:

<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol.documents/000000872.htm> When you have made notes, consider the following questions:

- How do the ideologies described above influence educational practices in countries you are familiar with? Think about possible linkages between ideologies and the structure of education systems, the nature and content of the curriculum, the relationship between academic and vocational education, approaches to teaching and learning, pupil organisation (mixed ability and setting, streaming, differentiation).
- research and discuss some of the key differences between education systems that have been strongly influenced by encyclopaedic traditions (e.g. the French Japanese systems).
- Do you feel ideologies are a useful/adequate tool for explaining cultural differences and priorities in education? In what ways might we critique the use of ideologies as a set of explanatory strategies? List 3 potential criticisms.

As we can see from Marshall's (2014) list above, one of the main aims of the field is the search for improvements with regard to educational policy and practice. Though this is not always as easy as some may think, learning from elsewhere is a clearly an important aim. In one way, looking at other education systems helps us to maintain an open mind by shining a light on alternative ways of doing things. This sometimes leads to a re-assessment of current practices, which can provide a useful platform for considering reforms. Phillips (2000), for example, shows us how UK interest in the German system was partly responsible for various changes and reforms here from the foundation of a national system in the Nineteenth Century, to the ways in which German curricular approaches were utilised to inform discussions that led to the Education Reform Act in 1988.

Growing appetites for educational comparison

Clearly, interests in educational comparisons are far from a recent phenomenon, though these interests have certainly grown over the last thirty years or more. Part of the reason for this has to do with the way in which access to other education systems has changed. The expansion of exchange programmes means that school pupils, university students and staff have first-hand, direct experience of other systems. Bartram (2009) discusses how other developments in travel, media, the advent of the internet, and changes in geo-political relations have added to these impetuses to look beyond borders in all spheres of life, including education. At the same time, demands for transparency and comparability of qualifications by an increasingly mobile "global" workforce have created further interest in education in other countries. Arguably the most significant reason for this growth in interest, however, is political, as national governments have become increasingly interested in the relationship between education and economic competition and cost-effectiveness since the birth of the knowledge economy (see Budd, 2018). Such sentiments are clearly evident in UK government thinking:

What really matters is how we're doing compared with our international competitors. That is what will define our economic growth and our country's future. (DfE, 2010:3)

This politically driven interest has 'for the wider general public its most visible manifestation in ...the shape of cross-national studies of educational achievement, and the widespread influence of related league tables' (Crossley, 2006:7). The ubiquity of such international rankings has both promoted appetites for comparison and heightened political sensitivities, in that political reactions to a perception of poor performance have prompted educational reforms in many countries (e.g. in Germany and Denmark after the 2001 PISA results were published – see Morris, 2012). League tables can of course be informative but they require careful interpretation and scrutiny.

Activity

Search the internet to see what you can find out about the OECD-led PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment) and the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). Discuss the following issues:

- Which countries appear to perform particularly well?
- What reasons (social and educational) *might* be responsible for such performance?
- How might it be wrong to value an education system on the basis of its ranking?

Challenges and problems

Clearly, then, educational comparisons have much to offer us, but careful interpretation is paramount, as is an understanding of the contextual factors within which an education system operates. A major question in this respect concerns the extent to which the comparison is valid. The need to compare like with like is one of the central tenets of the discipline (Grant, 1999:132), and yet it is not always adhered

to, or differences might not always be sufficiently recognised. A good example relates to the word ‘private’ as used in education. In English, the use of this word is very different from how it is used in the Netherlands, where it refers to *state-funded schools that develop their own curricula* based on particular religious or philosophical principles. In the 1980s, the then prime-minister, Mrs Thatcher, frequently referred to the popularity of Dutch ‘private’ schools (about 75 per cent of Dutch schools) to support her argument for expanding private provision in England, without acknowledging this very important conceptual distinction. This example illustrates the need for careful consideration of background detail relating to the issues and countries being compared.

Morris (2012) has been particularly critical of the ways on which politicians make selective use of information, often choosing particular elements that they can draw on to substantiate their own policy preferences. He gives the example of the ways in which the UK government, keen on overhauling the teacher training system at home, attributed Finland’s success in PISA rankings to that country’s highly rigorous and selective teacher recruitment policy. Japan, however, with different national priorities focused more on moving away from traditional teaching methods, cited Finland’s strong commitment to progressive teaching methods.

Notwithstanding political selectivity, there are many other reasons for exercising caution when interpreting and making comparisons. Important demographic differences may also call into question the validity of comparison. Countries like Japan and South Korea, for example, are often praised for their performance in literacy league tables. It should be remembered, however, that both these countries have largely indigenous populations, and consequently, the majority of pupils speak Japanese and Korean as their first language. This is very different from the situation in many European countries whose education systems have in recent years accommodated large numbers of migrant pupils who are often – at least initially – less proficient in the language in which they are assessed at school. Once again, ignoring this important contextual difference when judging comparative surveys of literacy would be highly questionable, as would any claims that might be made on this basis about superior teaching methods in the Far East.

Even when such differences have been allowed for, Bartram (2009) argues that further scrutiny may still be called for. Continuing the literacy theme, many international league tables during Tony Blair's time as prime minister saw England and Wales performing well – no doubt to some extent as a result of New Labour's key focus on literacy at that time (Alexander, 2001). In one respect, this is thus unsurprising given the priority of literacy development as a national educational aim. However, not all education systems focus on the same priorities. Murray Thomas (1990) illustrates how very different goals may be identified in different countries – some nations may focus on the development of self-fulfilment, vocational skills, social cohesion and identity formation in the wake of political unrest and upheaval, etc. Comparisons can therefore sometimes simply reflect differences in government priorities and goals, and it is vital therefore that they be judged accordingly.

Uncritical transfer

Many of the above examples illustrate problems concerning validity, fairness and bias in educational comparisons. These problems can become potentially dangerous if politicians use selective or partial information as a basis for policy reforms in the interests of 'quick-fix solutions or short-term political advantage' (Bartram, 2009:30). Crossley and Watson (2003:39) talk about the dangers of 'cherry-picking' practices deemed 'successful' in one country and recommending their adoption in another as 'education...cannot be de-contextualised from its local culture.' Even though 'common problems may exist in different countries... solutions can rarely be found in the application of a common model across different cultures' (ibid: 39). In this regard, Alexander (2001:41) was particularly critical of Labour's National Literacy Strategy that was introduced in the late 1990s in England, based on limited observations of practice elsewhere: 'since the most striking pedagogical contrast was the much heavier use of whole class teaching in the classrooms of the Pacific Rim and Continental Europe, it was assumed that a shift to this method in English primary schools would make the desired difference, reverse years of national decline and simultaneously propel Britain up the league tables.' For him, the implementation of this policy was founded on the rather simplistic assumption that high levels of literacy in these countries related to this form of pedagogy. His criticism focused in particular on the idea that such an assumption:

enables governments to legitimate their claim that questions of quality in education can be resolved by attaching pedagogy while ignoring structure and resources. (ibid: 30)

Though there were certainly fierce advocates of the policy then and now, Alexander's point about attempting to fix a complex issue by focussing on one practice adopted from abroad remains a valid one, and many have contended that the strategy still works better in the Far East, where didactic forms of pedagogy still tend to dominate, as do larger class sizes and strong disciplinarian approaches. Furthermore, we should not forget that the educational experience of many children in the Far East is routinely supplemented by the widespread use of crammer schools in the evenings (see Chan *et al.*, 2018) for a thorough discussion of this form of education often referred to as 'shadow education'). This practice, often regarded with some suspicion in the West because of the huge pressures it places on children, nevertheless has an impact on young people's learning, and partly explains the relatively higher performance of many Pacific Rim countries.

Many commentators (Auld and Morris, 2014, Bartram, 2018) are in fact highly critical of this form of opportunistic borrowing, selective contextual scrutiny and 'uncritical international transfer' (Crossley, 2006:11), driven by political motives. As Robinson (1999:223) makes plain, 'there is effectively no correlation between doing well in international tests...and overall economic performance,' and yet for all that, national governments appear to disregard the caution that many scholars have demonstrated is needed when interpreting complex comparative data. Prais' (2003) work is regarded as seminal in offering a sophisticated analysis of the vagaries of international rankings, discussing some of the bias and sampling issues that raise significant questions about the results of the 2001 PISA survey. England's performance appeared relatively strong in this survey as far as mathematics was concerned, and yet an IEA survey conducted only one year previously revealed a very different picture. Burghes (2018) offers some good examples of the ways in which issues of cultural bias can be especially important in such surveys, with suggestions that familiarity with test formats in certain countries (much has been made of a

Japanese cultural bias towards exams, for example) may skew scores and therefore not provide accurate impressions of performance.

Conclusion

Summing up, then, it is clear that our interest in international and comparative education is unlikely to diminish, given the ways in which it can illuminate our understanding of education systems, and the growing political appetites for examining and learning from elsewhere. As the chapter has illustrated, comparative studies have long covered a wide range of issues, investigating them using quantitative and qualitative approaches, and for a range of purposes. This breadth and diversity makes international and comparative education a particularly rich and dynamic field of educational research. As we have seen, however, interest in attaining greater understandings of education has been driven in recent decades by quests for economic improvement and political point-scoring, as governments around the globe increasingly incline towards a human capital view of education – defining its importance predominantly in economic terms. Such a situation only heightens our need for caution and awareness – as demonstrated in this chapter, over-simplified use of comparison can severely undermine the value of any claims based on and lessons derived from comparative investigations.

Research task

In groups, investigate an educational issue in four countries. This might be an aspect of the curriculum, a phase of education, an aspect of teaching, learning or assessment, a funding or management issue, a school subject, approaches to inclusion, etc.

You may find it useful to search national government websites, and visit Eurydice, the EU's education database (www.eurydice.org) and the World Education database (www.ibe.unesco.org)

Make a set of justified recommendations for educational change in one of the

countries on the basis of practice in the other three, whilst acknowledging your awareness of the various constraints (cultural, social, political, etc) that might impede the successful implementation of your proposals for change. Present your findings to the wider group.

Recommended reading

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